

4.

*A Denifition of World Renunciation**

Louis Dumont (1960) has drawn our attention to the unique character of world renunciation in India. Renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*), it is claimed, is a negative state –as its very name suggests– a denial of all that makes society what it is. Being an anti-structure to the established society, it is defined not by what it is, but by its rejection of the social structures. This is what sets it apart from all other ascetic and religious institutions of the world.

Such a view, attractive as it may seem, is always subject to the criticism that it is an alien interpretation made under the influence of certain anthropological and sociological theories. It is, therefore, helpful to examine how the Indian renouncers themselves understood their condition as renouncers.

In the very extensive literature on renunciation, both orthodox and heterodox, rarely does one come across a formal definition of renunciation. However, a work entitled *Yatidharmaṣṭakāśa* by Vāsudevāśrama (*Ypra*; Olivelle 1976–77) begins its discussion of renunciation with just such a definition. I will first give the Sanskrit text and its translation, and then examine how it helps us understand the significance and the essential features of world renunciation in the context of the traditional Indian society and social doctrine.

4.1.

saṃnyāso nāma vidhito gṛhītānāṃ nityanaimittikakāmyaśrautasmar-takarmanāṃ praiśamantraṃ samuccārya parityāgaḥ ||

na ca kuṭīcakādau śikhāyajñōpavitadhāraṇādeḥ karmaṇaḥ sattvād avyāptir iti vācyam, “śikhāyajñōpavitī syād” ityādiviśeṣasmarāṇāt tatra

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sikhādhāraṇādeḥ sattve 'pi tadītarasarvakarmaṇiparityāgasya sattvād avyāptivirahāt | na hy atra yāvatkarmaṇiparityāgo vivakṣitaḥ, paramahaṃse 'pi tasyāsattvenāsambhavāpātāt, paramahaṃsasyāpi prāgadhitavidikakarmakāṇḍaparityāge 'pi svādhyāyādhyāyanavidhipreraṇayā prāgadhitāraṇyakopaniṣacchatarudrīyapuruṣasūktādīdhāraṇasya devatāpūjanaprāṇāgnihotrādes ca sattvābhyupagamāt ||

na caivaṃ praiṣaṃ samuccāryāgnihotramātrasya saṃdhyāmātrasya vā parityāge 'tivyāptir iti vācyam, tādṛśaparityāge śruteḥ smṛter vā pramāṇasyābhāveṇa śaśaviṣṇānatulye tatrātivyāpter vaktum aśakyatvāt || parityāgaś ca nivṛttir eva | ata eva saṃnyāsino nivṛttisāstra evādhikāraḥ | na ca "saṃnyasya śravaṇaṃ kuryād" iti vidhiparivṛttih | katham | tatra vedāntaśravaṇetaran na kuryād iti pariśamkhyāśrayaṇāt | evam anyatrāpi "bhikṣācāryaṃ caranti" ityādau sarvatra ||

Renunciation is the abandonment of the *śrāuta* and the *smārta* rites –permanent, occasional and optional– which are known through injunctions, after reciting the ritual formula of the *praiṣa*.¹

(Objection I)

The Kuṭīcakas and the rest² do perform ritual acts, such as wearing the top-knot and the sacrificial thread. Hence, this definition is of insufficient extension.

(Reply)

That is incorrect. They do, no doubt, wear the top-knot etc., because the *smṛtis* mention special features (of them), e.g., “He should wear the top-knot and the sacrificial thread.”³ The definition, however, is not of insufficient extension, because they, nevertheless, do give up all ritual acts besides those (explicitly mentioned). For what is intended here (by this definition) is not the total abandonment of all ritual activity; this would be impossible, because it is not found even in the case of the Paramahaṃsa. The latter, no doubt, gives up the ritual portion of the Veda, which he had studied earlier. Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that, urged by the injunction to study the lesson proper to one,⁴ he holds on to the Āraṇyakas, the Upaniṣads, the Śatarudrīya hymn,⁵ the Puruṣasūkta,⁶

¹ This formula is: *saṃnyastaṃ mayā* — “I have renounced.” See below, n. 9.

² The term *kuṭīcakādi* indicates the first three classes of renouncers, namely, Kuṭīcaka, Bahūdaka, and Haṃsa, and it deliberately excludes the last class, namely the Paramahaṃsa.

³ *Sūta Saṃhitā* of the *Skanda Purāṇa*, 2.6.4.

⁴ This refers to the injunction: *svādhyāyo 'dhyetavyaḥ* — “One should study the lesson proper to one” (*ŚB* 11.5.6.3; *TĀ* 2.15.7). *svādhyāya* refers to texts that one is qualified (*adhikārin*) to study. First of all, this means the texts of one’s own branch of the Veda (*svaśākhīya*). In the case of the renouncers, however, it refers to just the *jñānakāṇḍa*, since he has abandoned the ritual portion of the Veda (*karmakāṇḍa*).

⁵ *VS* 16.1–66.

⁶ *RV* 10.90.

and other similar texts that he had studied earlier, and that he performs rites, such as the worship of gods and the fire oblation in the vital breaths.⁷

(Objection II)

The definition is too extensive, covering the abandonment of just the fire sacrifice or of just the *saṃdhyā* worship, after the recitation of the *praiṣa*.

(Reply)

That is also incorrect, for such an abandonment finds no authorization either in the Veda or in the *smṛtis*, and, consequently, is as impossible as a hare's horn. How then could the definition be said to extend to it?

Further, abandonment is nothing other than inactivity. Precisely for this reason, the qualification of a renouncer extends only to texts that promote inactivity. Now, no activity is entailed by the injunction: "After renouncing one should study," because there an exclusive specification is resorted to, to wit: "One should not perform any study other than that of the Vedāntas." The same applies to all other statements, such as: "They lead a mendicant's life."⁸

4.2.

This definition has two parts: i. the abandonment of rites, and ii. the recitation of the *praiṣa* formula. In examining these, we should bear in mind that the aim of the author is not to define renunciation *qua tale*, but to define what he regards as true renunciation, namely, that prescribed in the Vedas and the *smṛtis*. Consequently, the definition has to exclude both the men in the world and renouncers who have not renounced according to the Vedic ordinance, viz. heterodox renouncers and those who were not qualified to renounce, e.g., Śūdras.

Taking the second part of the definition first, the *praiṣa* formula, in itself, is only the formal declaration that one has renounced the world. In the context of the Dharmaśāstra tradition, however, it indicates something more precise, namely, the culmination of the rite of renunciation in the recitation of the formula: *saṃnyastaṃ mayā* – "I

⁷ This is the offering made in the fire of one's vital breaths. The formulae used in the rite are given in the *CU* 5.19–23. After the interiorization of the fires, the renouncer carries them in himself in the form of his breaths: "His outward breath (*prāṇa*) is the west fire (*gārhaṇatyā*), his downward breath (*apāna*) the south fire, his diffused breath (*vyāna*) the east fire (*āhavanīyā*), his upward breath (*udāna*) and his middle breath (*samāna*) the *sa-bhya* and the domestic (*āvasathya*) fires; he offers in the self" (*BDh* 2.18.8). For such a person partaking of food itself constitutes this sacrifice. See Śaṅkara on *VeS* 3.3.39–40. The rite is described in *BDh* 2.7.12.1–4. See also Heesterman 1964, 22f.; Varenne 1960: II, 69f.

⁸ *BU* 4.4.22.

have renounced,” in the prescribed manner.⁹ This is followed by the gift of safety to all creatures (*abhayaḍāna*): *abhayaṃ sarvabhūtebhyo mattaḥ* — “From me no danger (or fear) will come to any creature.” These two, together with the preceding declaration of intent (*saṃkalpa*), are considered the three essential elements of the entire procedure of renunciation.¹⁰ Consequently, those in imminent danger of death are permitted to renounce by merely reciting the *praiṣa* formula, either vocally or mentally. Besides this particular rite, the phrase *praiṣaṃ samuccārya* points to the entire procedure of renunciation (*saṃnyāsavidhi*), beginning with the eight *śrāddhas* and ending with the novice putting himself under the charge of a guru.

What is of crucial importance, however, to the understanding of the definition is that the recitation of the *praiṣa*, being a ritual act (in fact, the last ritual act he will ever perform), A. can only be performed by an *adhikārin*, i.e., one who is qualified to perform it under the Vedic rules, and B. is valid only if performed according to the prescribed rules of procedure (*yathāvidhi*).¹¹ This provision, therefore, excludes those who have renounced *de facto*, but were not qualified to do so, e.g., Sūdras, as well as those who, although qualified, have renounced without using the proper procedure, e.g. heterodox renouncers. Furthermore, as expressly stated by the author in his reply to the second objection, it excludes partial renunciation, viz. the abandonment of this or that rite.

From a theoretical point of view, however, the first part of the definition is of greater importance, since we are principally interested in what constitutes renunciation as such in the eyes of the renouncers, and not in how the one or the other category of renouncers defined itself as distinct from the rest.

⁹ Two procedures of this rite are given. One is ascribed to Śaunaka: *oṃ bhūr bhuvah svaḥ saṃnyastaṃ mayā saṃnyastaṃ mayā saṃnyastaṃ mayeti mandamadhyamottamasvareṅoktvā...* — “Having said: ‘OM Earth Atmosphere Heaven! I have renounced! I have renounced! I have renounced!’ (first) in a low pitch, (next) in a medium pitch, and (lastly) in a high pitch...” *YPra* 16.25; *YDhS*, p. 16. The other procedure is ascribed to the Bahvṛcapariṣiṣṭa: *prāṇmukhas tiṣṭhann ūrdhvaḥāhur brūyāt: oṃ bhūḥ saṃnyastaṃ mayā, oṃ bhuvah saṃnyastaṃ mayā, oṃ svaḥ saṃnyastaṃ mayā, oṃ bhūr bhuvah svaḥ saṃnyastaṃ mayeti trir upāṃsu trir madhyamaṃ trir uccaiḥ* — “Facing the east, standing with his arms raised, he should say: ‘OM Earth! I have renounced! OM Atmosphere! I have renounced! OM Heaven! I have renounced! OM Earth Atmosphere Heaven! I have renounced!’ three times in a whisper, three times in a moderate voice, and three times aloud.” *YPra* 16.23; *YDhS*, p. 16. A slightly different procedure is given in *BDh* 2.10.17.27.

¹⁰ *atra saṃnyāso nāma, āśramād anāśramād vā saṃnyāśāśramaṃ gacchāmiti saṃkalpaḥ praiṣocāraṇaṃ abhayaḍānaṃ ceti tritayaṃ eva* — “From among the preceding rites, renunciation essentially consists of three alone, namely, the declaration of intent: ‘From a state of life or from outside the states of life, I shall proceed to the state of renunciation,’ the proclamation of the *praiṣa*, and the gift of safety.” *YPra* 20.1. See also *YDhS*, p. 18.

¹¹ This is one of the two ways—the other being the doctrine of the *āśramas*—in which Vedic orthodoxy attempted to assimilate its negation (Olivelle 1993). In both ways, ritual orthodoxy managed to control the entry into a state over which it lacked control, thus, in effect, controlling that state. So, we have the paradox of the state of the abandonment of ritual and rules being instituted by ritual and rule. In some sense, this gave ritual status to the abandonment of the ritual.

Having defined renunciation as the abandonment of all the categories of rites, the author faces the obvious objection that certain classes of renouncers continue to perform some rites.¹² His reply is illuminating: “What is intended here is not the total abandonment of all ritual activity.” That is impossible, since even the Paramahamsas, the highest class of renouncers, continue to perform a limited number of rites. The fact that renouncers continue to engage in certain activities poses no difficulty, because they are not constitutive of the state of renunciation. We shall see later how these positive actions are to be understood within the framework of the definition. However, the point the author wishes to make is that renunciation is not constituted by these unavoidable positive actions, but by the abandonment as such of the body of ritual, which constitutes life-in-the-world. Whatever positive element there is in the life of the renouncers, even though it may in some way be peculiar to the life of renunciation, is only incidental to renunciation. Comparing renunciation with the other *āśramas*, which go to form the life-in-the-world, we note that, although each implies the abandonment of the life style of the preceding, nevertheless, they are defined and constituted not by that negativity but by the positive *dharma* proper to each. The opposite is true of renunciation, which is not defined by its own *dharma*, but by the negation of the *dharma* of life-in-the-world. We may even say that its *dharma* consists in the denial of the *dharma* of society. It is this essentially negative nature of renunciation that sets it apart from all other states of life and made it impossible for it to be totally integrated into the *āśrama* theory of life.

This negative character of renunciation is expressed in the descriptive epithets used with reference to the renouncer: *anagni* (a man without fire),¹³ *aniketa* (a man without home).¹⁴ The epithet *anagni* points to one of the most basic features of renunciation, namely the abandonment of fire. In fact, the abandonment of rites, referred to in the definition, is based on the abandonment of fire, because fire is central not only to the theory but also to the actual performance of rites.

An important element in the rite of renunciation is the *agnisamāroḥa* –the depositing of the ritual fires in the self. After that, the renouncer will never possess external fires; his vital breaths take their place. From then on his only *agnihotra* will be the *prāṇāgnihotra*.¹⁵

Right through the long history of Sanskrit culture, fire has occupied a central position. Fire, both as the physical fires of the ritual and

¹² The Sanskrit word *karma* indicates all actions enjoined by rules (*vidhi*). This includes both strictly ritual acts and those which, in another cultural context, would be regarded as non-ritual acts, e.g., cleaning the teeth, bathing, answering the calls of nature. This distinction of human activity is foreign to the Indian mind, but it is important to take note of this fact so as not to restrict the word ‘rite’ to strictly ritual acts.

¹³ *BDh* 2.18.22; *ĀpDh* 2.21.10; *MDh* 6.43.

¹⁴ *BDhS* 2.18.22; *ĀpDh* 2.21.10; *MDh* 6.43; *JābU* 6; *Uttarādhyaṇa*, 35.2.

¹⁵ See above n. 7.

as the fire god Agni, was central to the sacrifice, which was the basic element not only of the religion but also of the *weltanschauung* of the Vedas. Fire was the symbol of Aryan culture and civilisation. Aryans were permitted to inhabit only lands sanctified by fire.¹⁶ As the Vedic sacrifices were supplanted by the *smārta* domestic rites, and the Vedic gods gave way to the Hindu pantheon, fire and Agni continued to remain central to the fabric of orthodox society. The entire *dharma* of the householder, who occupied the central position in the orthodox social theory, revolved around the fire. It served both to cook his food and to offer oblations.

Renouncing fire signifies the rejection of the life-in-the-world in its totality, the denial of the entire value system of society. From it, moreover, are derived many of the characteristic practices of renunciators. Without a fire a renouncer can have no home; so he wanders. Without it he cannot cook his food; so he begs. Even in death he is an *anagnī*; he is not cremated, as is the custom with men in the world, but buried as befits a man without a fire.

Toward the end of his discussion, Vāsudeva asserts: *parityāgaś ca nivṛttir eva* –“Further, abandonment is nothing other than inactivity.” Consequently, the qualification (*adhikāra*) of a renouncer extends only to the *nivṛtṭiśāstra*. The latter refers both to prohibitory texts (*niṣedha*) and to texts dealing with knowledge (*jñānakāṇḍa*). The former restrains a man from activity, while the latter implies no activity. The *pravṛtṭiśāstra*, on the other hand, consists of injunctions (*vidhī*), which form the basis of human activity. Both *nivṛtṭi* and its opposite, *pravṛtṭi*, have a double significance. The latter indicates both activity and saṃsāric existence based on that activity, both of which are postulates of life-in-the-world. The former signifies both inactivity and the release from saṃsāric existence resulting from that inactivity, which is the goal of renunciation.

Next, the author tackles a thorny problem. How is one to explain the positive rules (*vidhī*) that regulate the life and activities of renunciators? Here he employs a concept borrowed from the Mīmāṃsā rules of interpretation, namely, *parisaṃkhyā* –“exclusive specification.” Āpadeva (*Mnp*, 244) defines it thus: *ubhayasya yugapāt prāptāv itaravyāvṛtṭiṃ parō vidhīḥ parisaṃkhyāvidhīḥ* –“When both alternatives are simultaneously established, an injunction whose business it is to exclude one is an injunction of exclusive specification.” The classical example of such an injunction is: *pañca pañcanakhā bhakṣyāḥ* –“The five five-nailed (animals) are to be eaten.”¹⁷ The natural instinct of man establishes the eating of these as well as of other five five-nailed animals. By specifying the eating of the former it excludes the latter, thereby forbidding the eating of

¹⁶ See, for example, the story of King Māthava, recorded in the ŚB 1.4.1.14.

¹⁷ MBh 12.139.66; Rām 4.17.39; ĀpDh 1.5.17.35; VaDh 14.39–40; MDh 5.17–18; YDh 1.1.177; ViDh 51.6; Śabara on Pms 10.7.28.

the latter. Hence, although it has a positive form, in reality it is a negative injunction. It is possible, therefore, for a person to refrain from eating the meat of *all* five-nailed animals, or, for that matter, of all animals. If the above was not a rule of exclusive specification, a person would be bound to eat the meat of these five five-nailed animals. All positive injunctions concerning renouncers are taken to be of the *parisaṃkhyā* type. Thus, the injunction: “After renouncing one should study,” in fact, means: “After renouncing one should not perform any study other than that of the Vedāntas.” This principle should be extended to all other positive injunctions. For example, the rule: “A renouncer should eat food that is begged,” indicates that a renouncer should not eat any food that is not begged. But he is not obliged to beg; he may, for example, refrain from eating altogether. However, if he wants to eat, this rule specifies that he must obtain his food by begging.

This rule of interpretation is, no doubt, the outcome of scholastic exegesis, and is often used to explain away difficulties rather than to offer genuine help in understanding them. Nevertheless, in the present case it does offer us a clue to the theological understanding of the life and activities of renouncers. We have already seen that the state of renunciation is constituted by the abandonment of the life of the man in the world. It is basically an “is not” rather than an “is”. However, renunciation does have some positive qualities. Renouncers do have a peculiar style of life and indulge in many distinctive habits and practices. How are we to understand these?

The *parisaṃkhyā* interpretation gives us a clue. As far as renunciation is concerned, none of these practices are significant in themselves. Their significance lies in the fact that they constitute the negation of other practices typical of life-in-the-world. What is truly significant is not what a renouncer does, but rather what he implicitly refuses to do by the very fact of doing what he does. Let us take, for example, the practice of begging. In its positive content, it may be viewed as an ascetic practice. As such, the practice of begging among renouncers is not different from that prevalent among Vedic students (*brahmacārins*) or among medieval Christian friars. However, the significance of begging as an act of renunciation lies in the fact that it is the immediate consequence of the rejection of fire, the central element of life-in-the-world. More directly, it denies the basic function of men in the world –earning a livelihood. Paradoxically, the man in the world, totally dependent as he is on social structures, attempts to have an independent livelihood, while the renouncer, totally independent of all ties and structures, is dependent on what he has rejected for his very existence.

In the same way as renunciation *qua tale*, the various stages of renunciation are also defined negatively as the abandonment of one or many particular practices present in the preceding stage. Thus, for example, the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣad* (1–2) states:

*kaupīnaṃ daṇḍaṃ ācchādanaṃ ca svaśarīropabhogārthāya ca lokasy-
opakārārthāya ca parigrahet | tac ca na mukhyaṃ | ko 'yaṃ mukhya itī cet |
ayaṃ mukhyo na daṇḍaṃ na śikhaṃ na yajñōpavītaṃ nācchādanaṃ carati
paramahaṃsah |*

He (the Paramahaṃsa) should get a loin-cloth, a staff, and a garment, for the good of his own body, and for the benefit of the world. That, however, is not primary. Should one ask: "Who, then, is primary?" (we respond): "This is the one that is primary. A Paramahaṃsa lives without a staff, without the top-knot, without the sacrificial thread, without a garment."

Commenting on this passage, our author states: "Thus, it is solely the abandonment of the staff and the rest, even though they have been taken possession of, that constitutes the primary state of a Paramahaṃsa." (*YPra* 4.108) The essential condition of a Paramahaṃsa, therefore, is as much a negative state with reference to the other stages of renunciation, as renunciation *qua tale* is with reference to life-in-the-world.

From the above analysis of the definition of renunciation given by Vāsudeva, we may draw the following conclusions:

1. Renunciation is essentially a negative state constituting an anti-structure to the life-in-the-world.
2. The true significance of the positive elements of the renouncer's life can only be understood by identifying their negative and negating dimension.
3. This negation of the life-in-the-world is central to the goal of renunciation, namely liberation (*mokṣa*), for as life-in-the-world is the epitome of *saṃsāra* so renunciation constitutes the threshold of *mokṣa*.

Although the historical development of the Vedic religion may explain certain of its aspects,¹⁸ renunciation erupted into the religio-cultural tradition of India as a totally new and unique phenomenon. It represented an anti-structure to the society of that time, a total rejection and the reversal of the value system of the world. Precisely for this reason, it was never totally assimilated into the structures of orthodox society or integrated into the framework of the orthodox doctrine of society. Orthodox thinkers were always ill at ease in dealing with renunciation, so foreign not only to their way of life but also to their framework of thought. As I have shown elsewhere (Olivelle 1993), it presented an embarrassment to the propounders of the classical theory of the *āśramas*. Nevertheless, society absorbed and integrated many of the values and ideals of the renouncers, who represent the one of the most creative elements of the intellectual history of India.

¹⁸ Such an attempt was made by Heesterman 1964.